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SUBJECT: JORDAN'S LOWER HOUSE AND SENATE AT ODDS ON ASSOCIATIONS LAW CHANGES FOR RELIGIOUS CHARITIES

REF: A. AMMAN 1620

[B.](#) AMMAN 1576

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Jordan's Senate and Lower House remain at odds over an amendment to the controversial Associations Law which would restrict the operation of non-Muslim religious charities to those of certain Christian denominations only. The amendment was proposed on the floor of the Lower House as a way of preventing "Jewish, Buddhist, and Baha'i" charities from operating in Jordan. The Senate rejected the amendment as unconstitutional, but the Lower House has now re-affirmed its support for the change. A conference committee will now seek a compromise solution. End Summary.

A Controversial Amendment

¶2. (U) During the July 12 debate in the Lower House on amendments to the controversial Associations Law, MP and former Amman Mayor Mamdouh Abbadi noted that the Associations Law as written would allow "Jewish, Buddhist, and Baha'i" organizations to operate in the Kingdom (Ref B). He proposed an amendment that sought to exclude these organizations by narrowing the category of acceptable non-Muslim charities to those run by Christian denominations recognized by the state.

(Note: There are no Jewish, Buddhist, or Baha'i organizations currently operating in Jordan. End Note.)

The Senate's Rejection

¶3. (U) During its July 19 session on the Associations Law, Jordan's Senate rejected Abbadi's amendment. Under Article 108 of Jordan's constitution, the state has the authority to recognize religions and denominations, which are then able to operate freely in the Kingdom and maintain their own religious courts. Jordan currently recognizes Islam, Judaism, and certain denominations of Christianity only. The Senate legal committee's report, which was adopted by the full Senate, declared Abbadi's amendment unconstitutional as it would infringe on the rights of the state to define which religions and denominations are acceptable.

Lower House Ups The Ante

¶4. (SBU) During its July 29 session, the Lower House rejected the Senate's amendments, again expressing concern about the possibility of "foreign (i.e., Israeli) influence" in Jordanian civil society should the amendments pass as originally proposed by the government. Defending the Senate's changes on the floor of the Lower House, Minister of Justice Ayman Odeh noted that the original amendments were designed to allow the continued operation of Christian charities whose denominational affiliation falls outside of the group of denominations recognized by the state. Odeh noted that the charitable works of these societies benefit average Jordanians. "These churches have registered as societies and have been working here for years...we would

have to close them down," he said.

¶15. (SBU) There are several Christian denominations which are not officially recognized by the state, but operate under the umbrella of charitable organizations which are registered under the current Associations Law. If the Lower House's version of the amendments prevails, their operations in Jordan could be jeopardized. These denominations include the Baptists, the Nazarenes, the Evangelical Free Church, Assemblies of God, and the Christian and Missionary Alliance. The Mormons are also currently registered as an association, and would be impacted by the amendment as well.

The Search for Compromise

¶16. (SBU) The issue will now be sent to a joint committee of MPs and Senators, who will attempt to find common ground on the issue that both houses can accept. That committee will be pressed for time. Parliamentarians are keen to finish their business in the extraordinary session before Ramadan begins on August 22, and there are still over thirty laws to consider. Many of these laws (such as the tax law and the social security law) are complex and controversial, leaving MPs and Senators little scheduling leeway to work out a compromise on the Associations Law.

Comment

¶17. (SBU) It has been some time since the Lower House and the Senate have come together in a conference committee to hash

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out the details of a law. While it seems likely that members of the Lower House will defer to the more experienced members of the Senate once they are behind closed doors, the influence of religion in the debate makes any outcome uncertain. Due to the effective dissolution of a civil society coalition designed to lobby parliamentarians on the law, there will be little outside influence from NGOs on a way forward (septel to follow).

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